
The Spirit & The Flesh: Sexual Diversity In American Indian Culture

American Historical Review 93 (February 1988):218-219

By skillfully integrating historical and anthropological literature with the results of his own unique cross-cultural fieldwork among contemporary berdaches, Williams provides an extraordinarily perceptive study of the berdache and the most comprehensive treatment of this controversial topic to date. One of the goals of this work is to "allow Indian people to speak for themselves" (p.7). The most effective use of quotations occurs in part 1, which explores the character of the berdache... Particularly valuable insights are conveyed by various traditionalists.... This is a provocative book that will undoubtedly rattle a number of cages. It will also prove to be an essential tool for scholars engaged in gender studies and an extremely useful source for ethnologists, historians and others interested in the human condition. There is a wealth of information in the book.

American Anthropologist 89 (December 1987): 978-979.

Walter Williams produced a detailed study of the sexual diversity among American Indians in six years, 1980-1986. "The Spirit and the Flesh" achieves an important place in anthropological literature regarding berdaches or transvestites and homosexual behavior among American Indians by means of finding and interviewing berdaches.

The recent general sexual revolution in the United States and the gay liberation movement contributed greatly to the production of Williams's wide-ranging and fully documented book. It will surprise some, shock some, but almost everyone can learn something new from it.

Journal of the American Academy of Religion 57 (Autumn 1989): 607-615.

Walter Williams explores both the extensive literature and the berdache phenomena in considerable depth in a volume that is a decided contribution to the discussion and understanding of complex issues. It becomes essential reading for all of us who would engage in an ongoing study, as well as for those busy academicians who would hope for at least some knowledge of the subject. They will find Williams' style eminently readable and at the same time well documented....

Williams would push us to move beyond a commonly cited definition to think of berdachism as representing a third, distinctive gender, a 'mixing' of the two biologically obvious genders.... Williams prefers 'gender mixing' as a more appropriate description of berdaches as an in-between gender.... Williams does a good job of surveying a great variety of ethnographic, anthropological and historical reports... Williams does put the ethnographic evidence into a new interpretive framework. This much alone insures that his work will be in the center of academic discussion about berdache traditions. It should be added that he has also done rather broad field work assessing the state of the issue in contemporary tribal situations....

The analysis of the shifts in contemporary Indian cultures, as we have noted, is one of Williams'

intended contributions.... He advances far beyond other interpreters, although there are certain problems. The strength of Williams' interpretation of the contemporary context and also the problematic is in the reporting of his field work, namely his broad based conversations with a variety of modern berdaches / gay Indians from very differing tribal traditions. While his treatment is not and probably could not yet be thoroughly systemic, he attempts to move beyond treatment of berdaches as merely a historical phenomenon.... At the very least, evidence from Native America will emphasize that it is simply not the case that the despising of homosexual individuals is a human universal.

Ethnohistory 37 (Autumn 1990):449-451.

Already a classic, this prodigal, prizewinning ethnography about cross-cultural sexual variation remedies serious empirical deficiencies even as it contains important interpretive problems of its own. The many and overwhelming data it presents confirm not only the presence of sanctioned homosexuality but its diverse institutionalization in indigenous and contemporary Native American cultures. Focused largely on male homosexuality, this book draws on Williams' fieldwork in North America, Central America, and Hawaii and on his exhaustive excavation of the ethnographic and historical literature....

Most of the evidence for the berdache's social legitimacy is strikingly convincing... yet at times the book's argument does not seem to register the contradictory evidence which, to its credit, it actually cites.... The narrative and theoretical voice is stronger in the second, historical section of the book, which uses a dialectical model of colonial domination to examine the transformation of the berdache tradition since European contact.... [It] illustrates very powerfully how domination, by contradictorily facing in as well as out, generates resistance: the recent gay liberation movement among whites, having drawn symbolic nurturance from the surviving berdache tradition, has in turn helped to energize that tradition as a symbol and catalyst of its own culture's revitalization....

The last chapter surveys data that suggest a wide cross-cultural range of sexual diversity. The concluding paragraphs rightly chastise social constructionists like Foucault and Weeks for their ethnocentric ignorance of emics, which prevents them from fully comprehending variant models of sexuality and gender or imagining truly revolutionary ones. While the book's own use of etics is a bit random (the first section's grab-bag functionalism posits now reproductive survival, now social leveling, now biopsychological need, as the telos of social custom), its description and evocation of emic categories admirably begin the task for whose continuation it calls.

Journal of American History 77 (June 1990): 308.

For decades anthropologists and historians have mentioned or provided brief discussions of the role of the berdache within traditional native American cultures, but this volume by Walter L. Williams, a professor of ethnohistory in the Program for the Study of Women and Men in Society at the University of Southern California, provides the first in-depth, systematic examination of this institution and its relationship to both Native American and Euro-American cultures. Combining extensive research in travel accounts, personal narratives, and anthropological reports with his own field research, Williams argues that the institution was prevalent throughout most of the western tribes, and that berdaches played prominent social, economic, and spiritual roles within tribal societies....

This is a well-researched, well-written study. Williams admirably blends his fieldwork with more traditional historical research, and the volume will unquestionably remain the standard reference work on this subject for the foreseeable future. Unfortunately, however, Williams's arguments for the legitimacy of the berdaches and his condemnation of Euro-American attitudes toward [gay and lesbian](#) sexual behavior occasionally border upon advocacy. In addition, his chapter arguing for the prevalence of clandestine homosexual behavior among such socio-economic groups as pirates or cowboys detract from his primary thesis. These shortcomings aside, this volume should be welcomed by historians and anthropologists studying Native Americans. It should also be well received by historians of sexuality.

by Walter L. Williams. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986 and revised edition 1992.

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